

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

041614Z Mar 05

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001170

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EUR/SE, EUR/PGI, OES/PCI, OES/EGC

E.O.12958: N/A

TAGS: [SENV](#) [EAID](#) [TBIO](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: AIR POLLUTION IN THE TURKISH CAPITAL. ANKARA BACK TO HAZY OLD DAYS?

Sensitive But Unclassified.

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Summary. Cleaning up Ankara's smoke-filled skies was an important environmental success story of the 1990s made possible by the introduction of natural gas to replace soft coal for home heating. But this winter, the acrid stench of sulphur from burning soft coal and fumes from vehicle emissions was much more noticeable than in recent years -- although it is unfortunately not possible to scientifically quantify what our eyes and noses tell us because of Turkey's inadequate pollution monitoring system. The city of Ankara's predicament is emblematic of the challenges Turkey faces in reducing environmental pollution, which will require overcoming government apathy and accommodating the demands of a growing population eager to reap the rewards of economic growth. End Summary.

Progress in the 1990s

12. (U) Ankara, which sits in a bowl-like mountain valley at 850 meters, was once choked by a dense layer of air pollution. Into the 1980s, the city's rapidly-growing population relied on Turkish lignite and low-quality fuel oil for heating. In 1988, Turkey began an ambitious program to replace these dirty fuels with natural gas purchased from the Soviet Union. Ankara and Istanbul were the first large cities to receive natural gas, and most businesses and residents quickly switched. The result was a dramatic improvement in air quality. Average sulphur dioxide levels in Ankara's air have dropped from 218 parts per million (ppm) in 1990 to 56 ppm in 2002.

Lignite and Vehicle Emissions Main Sources of Air Pollution

13. (U) However, progress has stalled in recent years. The 2001 financial crisis led to the relegation of environmental programs to the bottom of the government's agenda. Although Ankara's air pollution is far from as severe as it was in the 70s and 80s, a return of dirty air in Ankara appears to come primarily from two sources: the increased use of lignite and higher vehicle emissions -- especially from low-quality diesel fuel.

14. (SBU) Turkey's most abundant domestic fuel resource is high-sulphur lignite. Most Turks grew up in households heated with the smelly fuel. Especially in poorer neighborhoods, the smell of lignite is strong on cold days. The doubling of sulphur dioxide (SO₂) levels in the winter confirms anecdotal evidence that many of the city's poorer residents, faced with the rising cost of natural gas, are turning back to cheap lignite to heat their homes. The Ankara Municipality is supposed to ensure that residents do not burn lignite, but the press reports that it has not effectively controlled the sale and use of lignite in Ankara. In fact, the government may be contributing to the problem. Some local journalists report that much of the free coal distributed by the municipality to poor families is lignite.

15. (U) Ankara's population increased from 3.2 million in 1990 to over 4 million in 2000 (an average of over 200 new residents per day), but that rapid population growth is far outstripped by the boom in cars and trucks on the streets. There are 925,000 cars registered in Ankara, and that figure increases by about 600-700 per day. Gasoline quality has improved in recent years; however, Turkey's diesel fuel is of especially low quality -- with sulphur content of 7,000 parts per million (ppm); the EU standard is 50 ppm. Since diesel is sold at lower prices than gasoline, new car buyers opt for diesel cars that despite being new burn low-quality diesel and spew black smoke. As a result, diesel cars, trucks and buses are a serious cause of air pollution. Ankara has 1,190 city busses; most of them are old and all but a few burn diesel.

What Problem?

16. (SBU) By Turkish government standards, there isn't an air pollution problem. Turkey's pollution standards are much looser than those of the EU or WHO. Allowable levels were set in 1986 and are three times higher than current WHO standards. The Health Ministry, which is responsible for monitoring air pollution levels, consistently tracks only two pollutants (sulfur dioxide and particulate matter) at seven sights in the city. The Chamber of Environmental Engineers Ankara Section Head Cihan Dundar confirmed to us what we have heard from other officials and NGOs -- that the city's pollution monitoring equipment is inadequate to scientifically evaluate Ankara's air quality. The EU confirmed this conclusion in its 2004 Regular Report on Turkey's progress towards accession: "In the field of air quality, further legislation needs to be adopted and steps taken to start implementation, including upgrading of air quality monitoring."

17. (SBU) Nevertheless, the spotty data collected in the city seems to verify a recent deterioration of air quality. For example, average daily particulate levels in December 2004 (the most recent data available) were 95 ppm; the December 2003 average was 86 ppm. In addition, there were five days in December 2004 when particulate matter levels exceeded the WHO maximum, compared to four days in December 2003.

18. (SBU) A combination of government apathy and poor data means that very little is known about the health effects of Ankara's air pollution. According to Professor Cagatay Guler of the Hacettepe Medical School, there are no studies in Turkey of the health effects of air pollution. A 2004 WHO study on the health effects of air pollution in European cities linked air pollution to a number of serious health effects, such as respiratory and pulmonary disease; the report concluded that 100,000 people in Europe die each year as a result of particulate matter in the air and noted that particulate matter from diesel engines was among the most harmful. Given the higher pollution levels in Ankara, it is reasonable to expect that Ankara's citizens suffer a greater degree of health problems, including avoidable deaths.

Improvements will Be Driven by the EU

19. (SBU) The Turkish government has shown little interest in or capability for tackling many of the country's serious environmental problems. The result has been a slow deterioration of environmental standards. Reports written in advance of the December 17 European council decision to begin accession negotiations remarked on Turkey's environmental shortcomings: "the administrative capacity to deal with environmental issues is less developed than those of the new Member States at a similar stage of the pre-accession process." Reflecting the scope of the problem, EU officials estimate that it will cost about Euro 50 billion to bring Turkey into compliance with EU standards.

10. (U) The prospect of EU membership and the process of adoption of the acquis has begun to force the GOT to start putting environmental issues, including air quality, higher on its list of priorities.

-- Improving air quality is listed as a priority in Turkey's National Program for the Adaptation of the EU Acquis. The National Program states that establishment of a sound air quality monitoring station network, improvement of the laboratory infrastructure, training on legislation and technical issues for the staff involved in air quality and strengthening of the system to inform the public on air quality are the necessary institutional changes that should be realized.

-- In June 2004, the government approved regulations to improve the quality of vehicle fuels, in order to comply with EU directives. The regulations mandate that sulphur levels in diesel be reduced from 7,000 ppm to 50 ppm in 2007 and 10 ppm in 2009.

-- Sedat Kadioglu, DDG Environmental Management of MOEF, told us the Ministry has been working on legislative arrangements to extend fuel quality standards to heating devices and enforce rules making natural gas heating mandatory where it is available. He added that the MOEF would actively participate in air pollution monitoring, and will purchase new monitoring equipment and use on-line data tracking.

COMMENT

11. (SBU) Ankara's darkening skies are one of the most visible -- and annoying -- signs of Turkey's environmental problems. Other serious problems include the lack of clean drinking water for much of the country and the widespread fouling of the land and water with unregulated waste disposal. Although we cannot quantify the health effects of

Turkey's environmental problems, we do know that they are significant and will continue to exact considerable costs in terms of public health and living standards for years to come. Turkey's EU accession and adoption of Europe's higher environmental standards, though estimated to cost Euro 50 billion, will result in long-term improvements in health, life expectancy and Turkey's productivity. The EU estimated that the Euro 80 - 120 billion it cost to bring the 10 newest members up to EU environmental standards will result in tangible benefits of between Euro 134 and 681 billion.

EDELMAN